

Gerhard Richter Birkenau

On display on the north wall of the Reichstag Building's western entrance hall, from where there is an uninterrupted view into the plenary chamber, is Gerhard Richter's installation *Black, Red, Gold*, an abstract composition on glass covered with colour enamel. This work of art has been here since the Reichstag Building reopened in 1999. When he was first asked to create an installation for the newly redesigned Reichstag, Richter considered using motifs from documentary photographs of National Socialist camps and even drew some sketches, but later abandoned the idea, unsure "whether the painted enlargements of these photos could ever be construed as artworks". He felt, too, that it was not appropriate to confront people with such sombre images in the entrance to the new Bundestag.



Nonetheless, he returned to this theme in 2014, when he came across photographs, taken clandestinely by prisoners who were members of a *Sonderkommando* for the burning of corpses in Auschwitz-Birkenau. The photographs were published in the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* in 2008 as part of a review of Georges Didi-Huberman's book *Images in Spite of All*. With these photos to form the basis of a new work, Richter set out in a radically different direction: away from the figurative and towards an abstract depiction of their motif.

Richter began by transferring the photographs onto four monumental canvases. Then he painted over them again and again, applying layer after layer of colour during several phases of work from July to September 2014 and using his signature squeegee technique, which he had been perfecting for years. After initial brushwork to apply the paint, the

artist used a home-made squeegee to spread the colour across the canvas and to rub it or scrape it off. Richter first applied a brown, grey and black layer, then began working in red a few days later, then green. He finished off the paintings by adding a top layer of grey and black.

Richter created two reproductions of the four paintings as a photo version sealed behind acrylic glass. A direct print on aluminium was produced especially for the Reichstag. Prints of the original photographs are displayed alongside the paintings, "not as a piece of art but as a document and memento" (Gerhard Richter). Reproductions and details of the paintings are also included in Richter's fine arts publication *Birkenau* (2016) and in a recent collection of personal accounts by survivors of the concentration camps:

Birkenau cycle of paintings (CR 937/1–4), photographed in Gerhard Richter's studio in 2014.

Gerhard Richter, born in 1932 in Dresden, is based in Cologne.

The four photographs of Auschwitz-Birkenau camp on display in the Reichstag Building's west lobby.



*"How can I describe it all?" asks Peter Lebovic at the start of his "Memories of the Longest Year of My Life", 1944, the year which took him to Auschwitz, the Warsaw Ghetto and Dachau. "How can one ever describe the hunger, the humiliations, the beatings, the fear, the dirt, the brutality, the whole atmosphere?" For this project, 15 Holocaust survivors remember their time in German concentration camps, how they survived, and their lives afterwards in Switzerland and elsewhere, each recalling their own individual story and yet also their shared history. This is a unique body of testimony from surely the last remaining witnesses to the Holocaust. Each eye-witness's story is accompanied by a painting by Gerhard Richter.*¹

¹ „Mit meiner Vergangenheit lebe ich“ – Memoiren von Holocaust-Überlebenden. Edited by Ivan Lefkovits. With 15 illustrations by Gerhard Richter. Jüdischer Verlag im Suhrkamp Verlag, Berlin 2016



With his Birkenau paintings, Richter comes back once again to a question which has pre-occupied him at every stage of his life and work: whether and how the horrors of unspeakable crimes can and should be explored through the medium of art. To what extent can art make visible, depict and communicate themes such as these?

Gerhard Richter first came across documentary photographs of the concentration camps as an art student at Dresden's Kunstakademie soon after the war. He found that he could not put the images out of his mind. Richter soon began exploring the issue of remembrance and the horrors of National Socialism through his art, even in the early days: his portrait *Aunt Marianne* (1965) is an example. Richter's aunt, Marianne Schönfelder, became a victim of the National Socialists' euthanasia programme during the final few weeks of the war.



Confronted with the documentary photographs of Auschwitz concentration camp, Richter saw a limit to the capability of conventional art to capture such horrors. With his *Birkenau* cycle, he therefore adopted a new approach: after first producing a figurative image, he overpainted the canvas with layer after layer of colour, which he then reworked over and over again. This process of painting, scraping and reapplying layers of colour does not alienate the viewer from the motifs of the four photographs, nor does it conceal them under layers of abstraction. On the contrary, just as the recollection of this darkest chapter of German history is burned into the collective memory, so the photographs which evoke these horrors remain ever-present and vivid beneath the layers of paint, as if beneath the surface of the lives and memories of the generations that came afterwards.

Aunt Marianne and *Uncle Rudi* (both 1965), oil on canvas.

Positioning Richter's two works – *Birkenau* and *Black, Red, Gold* – opposite each other in the Reichstag Building, the seat of the German Bundestag, creates an arc of reflection which shows the historical dimensions of Germany's self-image right here at the heart of German democracy. It is a contribution to Germany's culture of remembrance, which is all the more important as the number of survivors who are left to bear witness diminishes.

The *Birkenau* cycle is Gerhard Richter's own personal way of creating a memorial to the prisoners and their fate through the medium of painting. He does not offer simplistic answers, but trusts the viewer to respond to and explore the doubts which preoccupied Richter himself. His works are

a starting point for a conversation about what art can contribute to a culture of remembrance that is, simultaneously, a warning to future generations. This is fundamental to Richter's thinking and work as an artist. He relies on and trusts the thoughtful viewer to make the effort to look closely, to engage in a process of reflection, to interpret and to make a journey of their own. It is a position which respects and takes seriously, indeed, is predicated upon, the autonomy of the other, in the true spirit of democracy.



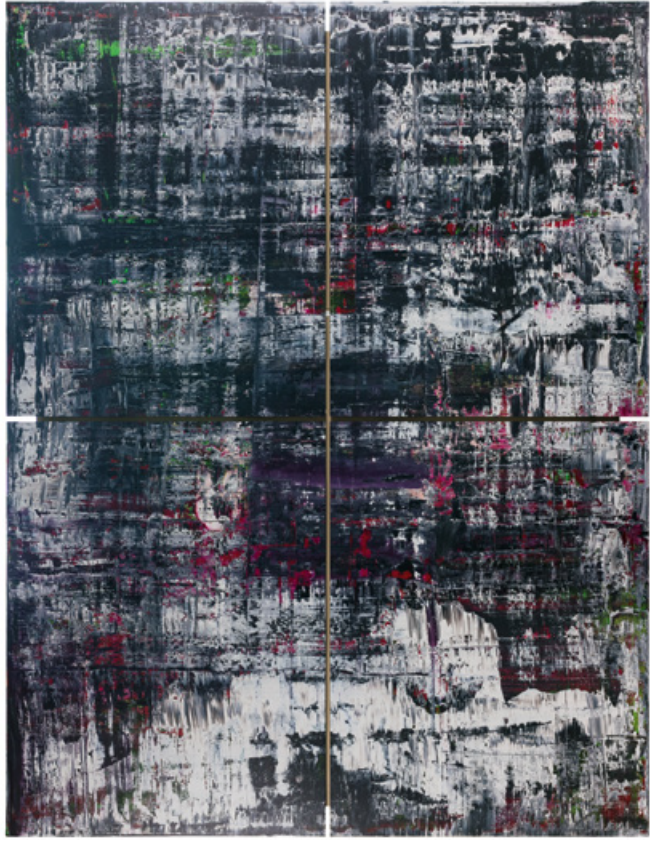
Formal opening of the installation by Bundestag President Norbert Lammert in the presence of the artist on 4 September 2017.



Gerhard Richter, *Birkenau* cycle of paintings, 2014/2017, Photo Version, direct print on Signicolor aluminium panels, four quarters for each of four artworks, each panel 130 × 100 cm, each artwork 261.5 × 201.5 cm, CR 937-D
4 photographs of an anonymous member of the *Sonderkommando* of Auschwitz, August 1944
Print: Atelier Gerhard Richter, 2015

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Art at the German Bundestag
Gerhard Richter